

Freedom

by Ashfae

Category: Rurouni Kenshin
Genre: Romance
Language: English
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2000-04-29 09:00:00
Updated: 2000-04-29 09:00:00
Packaged: 2016-04-27 16:40:03
Rating: K
Chapters: 1
Words: 3,365
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: Aoshi & Misao WAFF.

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><div class="center">By Ashfae<div>

This story is dedicated to Harumi-chan...thanks, Harumi. =)

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"The prison unto which we doom ourselves no prison is."

>-Unknown<div>

> I know she is there before she enters the room, before she has a chance to lift her hand and slide the door open. My eyes remain closed; I focus on the sounds of the door sliding closed once more, her feet tapping along the floor towards me, the clinking of teacups. I focus on these things, instead of her presence. <p>

It is an odd ritual that she has started. She is exuberant even at her most quiet; I would not have expected her to attempt--much less enjoy--something involving as much concentration as a tea ritual. But then, she is growing older, and she has changed a great deal. Not only during the time while I was absent, but since my return.

I know that much of it is because of my actions, my decisions. When I rejected the Oniwabanshuu to chase Himura, it didn't occur to me that she would attempt to take my place as leader. I thought that the Oniwabanshuu would die with me. Arrogant, yes...but I believed the

Oniwabanshuu would have no place in the quiet Meiji era. I am a warrior; the Oniwabanshuu are a team of warrior elite. As time passes, we will become unnecessary. For me, it was enough that we be remembered as we were in our prime.

But perhaps there can be a place for us in this new era, after all. Perhaps Misao will prove me wrong. The responsibility of leadership weighs heavily on her, but she is learning quickly. Every day she comes to me with a new question, a new idea...it is interesting. The townspeople know who we are, now; oddly, it has made us popular.

But then, who could fear us, with Misao as our spokesman? She gives her smile freely, with no more thought than she puts into breathing. Every inch of her radiates sincerity.

Just as surely as I radiate...nothing at all.

This is intentional on my part; it always has been. At first it was a way of protecting myself from the difficulties of leadership--it was hard, so very hard, to send my comrades into dangerous situations, knowing that they might not return. Hardest of all to feel each death weighing on my conscience. It was easier to distance myself, so that the pain was less...the regret of a general who has lost a soldier, rather than the aching grief of a man who has lost a friend.

But Misao...she goes to the opposite extreme. She turns every stranger into a friend, every warrior into family. Her optimism binds the Oniwabanshuu as closely to her as my confidence and capability did.

The same results, different approaches...I wonder what skills she would have developed if I had stayed.

I wonder how she will react the first time she loses one of her men.

She sets her tray down between us, taking her place across from me. She does not look at me; she has no need. She knows that I do not mind the intrusion.

A confusing sort of ritual, completely out of place with her character...at first, I assumed that she was using it to coax me out of my reticence, that she believed my introspection excessive. Now, I think she simply likes having something that belongs only to the two of us, a tradition that no one else has a part in.

Perhaps she simply likes spending time with me.

Also a confusing idea. All my life, I have been Aoshi the warrior, Aoshi the Okashira...very rarely has anyone ever tried to get through to Aoshi the man. Very rarely has anyone wanted to.

Even more rarely have I ever wanted anyone to know that man.

Once, Misao took it for granted that I belonged to her, every part of me. It was almost a game, when she was a child: Misao-chan knew Aoshi-niichan better than anyone else; Misao-chan was the only one who could get through the Okashira's wall and make him smile.

It stopped being a game while I was gone. Her adoration was not a whit lessened by my absense; if anything, it increased. I had no idea. When I returned to Kyoto, chasing Himura, I never guessed that my actions would cause her such pain. When I told her that I never wanted to see her face again, I knew I was being cruel; I didn't know that I was breaking her heart.

I don't know how to begin to repay her for that, even if she forgives me. But I could never have been the image she made of me, even if I had known of it. And perhaps it is better that she know that I, too, am only human...that I can make mistakes. That I can hurt and be hurt.

Her knowing that is what has changed our relationship most. She no longer looks at me with blind adoration, even though her feelings are strong. She weighs what I have to say on her own scales of judgement, accepting or rejecting in accordance with what she thinks is right or wrong. She no longer thinks that I move the sun and sky.

It is a relief, even if I grieve the loss of her innocence. If I could have kept her sheltered and protected forever... perhaps I would have. If it saved her any pain, then perhaps.

But no one remains a child always.

And now...now we become friends, in the truest sense of the word. She confides in me, and occassionally I confide in her. The only subject we do not discuss is ourselves, our relationship.

This is what worries me. Her adoration is no longer blind, but it is still there. I keep waiting for her feelings to change, for her to seek a companion somewhere else. But she is here every morning.

I don't understand. I cannot say what brings her back to me every day. I have not encouraged her; I have never even given her any hints that I return her feelings. Perhaps I am not entirely sure that I do. This Misao who kneels in front of me carefully pouring tea is a very different person from the little girl I left behind, even if they share the same enthusiasm. I am still learning her ways, even after all this time. She still surprises me.

I do love her, I know; not as my once little sister, not even as a woman exactly, but simply as Misao. Misao, who is fearless and determined and beautiful. Misao, who delights and astonishes and waits.

Misao, who has built almost all of her life around me.

I do love her. But to give her what she wants from me...would it be right? I have hurt her so much in the past; I would do anything to avoid hurting her again. She has never tried loving anyone else, only me. To give in to her wishes is to take advantage of her feelings for me. She is still only beginning to know me; the Aoshi she loved before was largely a figment. She is young yet...she might change her mind, follow someone else, leave me behind. I should let her be free to do so. She should have the chance to at least consider other options, before setting herself so firmly along this path.

But unbidden, the thought appears: right or wrong, I do not know if I could let her go, now. It is one thing to tell myself that she might

fall in love with someone else someday, that she should feel free to do so. It is quite another to imagine her in someone else's arms when I want her so much in mine.

But no. It's been a long, long time since I held a woman...longer still since I tried to love one. And no one was ever as important to me as Misao has become. Misao belongs to the Meiji Era; I am part of a past that is slowly fading into air. I have no place here, whatever she might think. Better to let her be free.

Better that she forget about me than ever let me hurt her again.

I repeat the words in my head as we move through the forms of the tea ritual; turning the cup around, sipping the tea, cleaning the cup. Her every motion is graceful, but I can tell that she is as distracted as I am. We are not doing the ritual justice: it deserves a level of concentration that neither of us can supply today.

Because Misao is steeling herself to tell me something, and I am steeling myself to hear it.

I will not take advantage of her.

These are the words that I think, but deep down there is another truth: I am afraid, more afraid of what she might say than I have ever been of anything. I don't know what I fear more...an ending, or a beginning. Accepting a place by her side would mean finding a place for myself in this strange era that does not need or want warriors. It would mean changing myself even further, and I do not know if I can. I need more time.

She finishes cleaning implements of the tea ceremony and places them back down on the tray. Usually during this time of day we talk--about the Oniwabanshuu, about our friends in Tokyo, about whatever comes to mind. If she has anything to say, she will say it now.

We sit in silence, both of us gathering our resolve.

"Aoshi-sama."

I look at her.

She is kneeling only a few feet away from me, her hands holding each other tightly in her lap. The blood is drained from her fingers; she must be even more nervous than I realized, for her hands to be clenched that tightly. She is biting her lip, as she tends to do when she is about to attempt something she finds nerve-racking.

My heart sinks within me as I wonder if it is true that she has found someone else, even as I am convinced that I could not fill that place in her life. It is frustrating to believe two such contradictory thoughts at once.

"Aoshi-sama, there's something I've been meaning to say to you. You...I mean, you must know...the way I feel about you...the way I've always felt..." Her voice trails off as she looks desperately at me for encouragement.

I can't encourage her. I won't. Even if it means that she does find

someone else, even if it means she leaves me behind and moves on...I won't encourage her. I will not take advantage of her.

However tempted I might be.

She has drawn in a breath, determination gathering in her eyes.
"Aoshi-sama--"

"Misao," I interrupt, before she can say anything too dangerous. "You don't need to say anything. Please."

There is silence for a minute. For one minute, I am still safe.

She moves; I look up to see her crawling towards me on hands and knees. She was close to begin with; she is even closer now. "Misao, what--"

"You said yourself that I don't need to say anything, Aoshi-sama..." her voice whispers softly, her lips brushing against my cheek. Desire hits me in a wave, leaving me too stunned to react at first; I can't remember the last time I was so very aware of a woman's presence, the last time I wanted...Misao's movements are hesitant, but she shows no signs of backing away. Slowly--so very slowly--her mouth inches towards mine. I can feel her breath, I can...

My hand is reaching up; I'm not sure if I'm intending to pull her against me or push her away.

"No." The latter, then. My will gives me determination, and I take her by the shoulders and push her backwards, standing and pulling her up with me. I continue to hold her shoulders, looking into her eyes as seriously as I can--every inch the mentor, the older brother, the okashira. "No. Misao, I cannot let you do this. Go."

Something flickers through her eyes. "You can't let?" Instantly I wonder if the words were a mistake...they may only have encouraged her. "Aoshi-sama...don't you want me?"

Her eyes are wide and bright, cautious--they have never doubted the answer until this moment, and now...they wonder.

I don't know how to answer her. I need more time to think about this. I release her shoulders. "Go."

Her eyes narrow. "Why?" She steps forward; I step backwards, keeping the distance between us. "Why? I'm not a child anymore, Aoshi-sama--you must see that. You don't have to protect me anymore, and you can't keep me from making my own decisions." Another step forward, another step back. I will be firm on this. I must, for her sake. "Or do you?" Her eyes are flashing; this is not good. "Is that how you see me, Aoshi-sama? A little girl that you watch over? Is that it?"

That wasn't my thought at all, but she gives me no chance to rebuff. One of her fists flies towards my face; I block it without thinking, and only the knowledge that this is Misao keeps me from an automatic counterattack. She continues to advance more and more quickly, throwing punches and kicks that take more and more of my concentration to guard against. She is not holding back, and before long we are circling the room in a series of attacks and counters.

Her skills have improved, but she still is not a match for me, especially not while she is so angry and easy to read. All I have to do is wait for her to tire; then I can talk her out of this, make her see reason.

What...?

My foot lands on something unexpected--the tray of tea utensils, completely forgotten. It slips beneath my foot, and for one precious second my balance is lost. That one second is all she needs. With a short little cry she hurls herself at me, knocking me flat onto my back on the floor, with her sprawled across my chest. Once more my hands reach up to her shoulders, even as I am attempting to regain the wind that was knocked out of me by the fall. But before I have a chance to push her aside, her lips are on mine. My hands freeze, then continue up to her shoulders and hold her against me.

I can't help it. The moment is too exquisite...her kiss is passionate, born not only of desire and love but of anger, desperation. I am responding before I think not to do so, and then I can't bring myself to stop. She shifts position so that her legs are pressing against my sides as she crouches on top of me, her arms resting on either side of my head and her hands tangled in my hair.

I have forgotten how to think. I might have forgotten how to breathe. For the moment, all I'm aware of is her, pressed against me. All my previous convictions have less weight than air.

The kiss breaks; her mouth remains just above mine for a moment, tantalizing. She sits up, looking down on me, her weight resting on my lower abdomen. My hands reach involuntarily after her for a second as she pulls back, then I use them to support my weight, leaning on my elbows.

I can't think of anything to say.

Her gaze is hard, and a little triumphant. "Now, Aoshi," she says quietly. "Tell me now that you don't want me. Tell me now that you want for me to go, and I will, and I'll never speak of this again."

Those words stop me. It was one thing to tell her to leave before, but now? She will know if I lie to her; every inch of my body is screaming for her to fall back into my embrace. And to never have her near me again...

Something else catches my thoughts.

Aoshi...not Aoshi-sama, but Aoshi. Not onmitsu to okashira, or little girl to her mentor. Just Misao and Aoshi: friends, equals...lovers.

And that, I realize, is something I want very much. Perhaps as much as she does.

Perhaps her dream is not as impossible as I believed.

Her eyes are flickering again, the confident gleam fading out of them. She's scrambling to her feet, backwards, away from me. She's

leaving, and if she leaves she won't be back, and in that instant my decision is made.

As she is still attempting to get to her feet I sit up, grab her around the waist with both hands, and pull her back down. She lands in my lap with a bit of a squeak, and squeaks again when I kiss her. My arms have wrapped tight around her so that she can't pull away this time--so that she knows I won't push her away again--and my mouth is hot and hungry on hers.

Her surprise lasts only a moment, and then she is kissing me back just as ferociously, her arms locked around my neck and her legs around my waist. The feel of it is amazing, as though every inch of her body is in contact with mine. My arms tighten around her even more, and one of my hands wraps itself in her braid. A small part of my mind is astonished, furious at my lack of control--but most of me doesn't care.

Gradually the kiss becomes less frenzied; gradually our hands begin to roam, seeking to know the feel of one another. One of my hands lifts up to her face, learning the way it feels beneath my palm. One of hers holds onto my shoulder.

The kiss is less and less urgent, then stops entirely. She pulls away to the distance of an inch or two, looking me directly in the eyes. I ignore the part of me that doubts and meet her gaze without flinching.

Slowly she smiles, and rests her head in the crook of my neck. My arms wrap loosely around her, my eyes drifting over this new wonder--her body, wrapped in mine.

Doubts rise to the surface. It is probably too late to try and be fair to her, but..."I did not want to reach this point so soon. I wanted you to be free to change your mind."

She snuggles against me, the hand that is on my shoulder rubbing a finger along my neck. "What made you think I wanted to be freed?"

I almost chuckle; she has a point. I underestimated her. The last of my reservations about this development fades. If she is so certain that it is me she wants, then I will do the best I can to make sure she doesn't regret her decision. Perhaps I can find some way to be the man she dreams about.

My thumb rubs against the bare skin on her arm, enjoying the feel of it. "I do want you."

She laughs; her breath tickles my throat. "I noticed." She places a light kiss on the underside of my chin, her arms holding me a bit more tightly. "Aoshi...I love you." Her voice is shy, quiet...but the words are filled with a happiness so great that I could not ignore it if I chose.

Something inside me clicks; disjointed pieces fit together. Something that was caged is released.

"I know," I whisper.

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